

Questions and Answers about LEAVING GEE'S BEND

What is the book about?

LEAVING GEE'S BEND is a heart-touching tale of unexpected adventure in the vein of such classics as SOUNDER, LITTLE HOUSE ON THE PRAIRIE and STONE FOX - stories rooted in history that families can read and enjoy together. It's about a determined, ten-year-old girl in Depression-era Gee's Bend, Alabama, who sets out to save her sick mother and records her adventures in quilt pieces. It includes the real-life 1932 raid on Gee's Bend and subsequent Red Cross rescue.

Tell us about the main character.

Ludelphia Bennett is ten years old, and she may be blind in one eye, but that doesn't mean she can't put in a good stitch. She sews all the time, especially when things go wrong. Her quilts tell her story.

What inspired you to write this book?

I was inspired to write this book in 2003 when my husband and I traveled to New York City and viewed the Quilts of Gee's Bend art exhibit at the Whitney Museum. Although I live only 120 miles from Gee's Bend, it wasn't until then that I became aware of the art and history of Gee's Bend. Something happened to me as I walked through those rooms... I was moved by the quilts and by the voices of the quilt makers. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know: What if your community was so remote and isolated that it didn't have a doctor, and your mother was seriously ill? What if you were black and you saw a white person for the very first time? What if you thought the whole world was just like what you saw from your front porch and found out it wasn't? What if you wanted to make a quilt but didn't have anything but scraps of cloth to work with?

Why did you want to write this book?

I wrote it for little girls like me - ones who feel things deeply and fiercely, ones who are quietly thirsting for all the world can offer them. And it also has to do with my childhood - my mother is an amazing seamstress, and I grew up to the hum of a sewing machine. I stitched my first sewing card when I was four years old and still wish I could create the beauty my mother does out of lace and satin and silk. Later I married into a quilting family, so I learned firsthand the joy of quilting. Ludelphia is actually named after my husband's grandmother who created all of the

quilts in my home. This book is a way to honor the nearly lost tradition of hand-sewn garments and bedding.

What message do you hope readers will take away from this book?

Even if you are barefooted and don't have a map to guide you and the path is unknown... go your own way. Create the life you want. And tell your story in whatever way that makes sense to you - maybe even in a quilt.

What personal experiences did you draw upon when writing this book?

I've spent a lifetime being quietly rebellious and like a little bit of disobedience in my characters. When I was Ludelphia's age, one way our family saved money was by my mother making clothes for my sister and me. They weren't exactly in style. But instead of hurting my mother's feelings, I just borrowed clothes from a friend and changed into them on the bus. Eventually I got caught... oh the shame and embarrassment! I hated disappointing my mother. And this is a big driving force in Ludelphia's life as well -- this tension between wanting to be her own person and wanting to please her mother.

What research did you do?

I was extremely fortunate in that the history of Gee's Bend has been well-documented, especially by Tinwood Alliance, the group who put out the companion books to the art exhibit. I made several trips to Gee's Bend and the Wilcox County Library which occupies the top floor of the old courthouse in Camden. I pored over old newspapers and listened to audio recordings. I followed one of the quilters, Tinnie Pettway, around to various readings and exhibits. I learned there are basically two camps in Gee's Bend: ones who want to get away as quickly as possible and ones who can't imagine living anywhere else. I tried to represent both in my book.

Did you unearth anything unexpected in your research?

There were all sorts of funny superstitions in Gee's Bend during that time -- they would put devil's lye under the front porch to ward off evil spirits. Or a sifter under the bed so that a spirit would be so busy counting the holes that it would forget what it came for. In the book there's a rumor about "the witches of Gee's Bend," which plays heavily into the climax of the story (and was the original title of the book). When I was Ludelphia's age and heard a rumor about a friend being "evil." Now I know it wasn't true, but I just kept my mouth shut about it. I never wanted to be the center of any controversy. Writing this story gave me a change to re-do that experience.

Tell us about the road to publication.

From the time I first saw the exhibit to the point of sale, it was four years. Part of that was because it had been my dream to become one of those slush-pile miracles, so I started out submitting my work to editors, which takes much longer. But it was also because I was busy educating myself on how to write fiction, and that takes time. (I'm still learning.) One of my first Gee's Bend stories was a verse novel - poetry, my comfort zone. But when I sent it to my now-agent, she said she liked the story but she couldn't sell it in verse. So I decided to rewrite it in prose. Along the way, I switched the main character to a girl (a minor character in a previous version) and changed to first person point of view. I wrote three novels set in Gee's Bend before I finally got to Ludelphia's story, the one I was meant to tell all along.

What were the easiest and hardest parts about writing this book?

Easiest: spilling all Mama's wisdom. There are about 25 instances in the book where Ludelphia recalls some of her mother's words. Things like, "Mama always said talking about the fire don't boil the pot." This was easy because my mama always said stuff too -- things like, "err on the side of love." My favorite actually didn't make it into the book, because I could find no history of its use in this African American community: "as you sew, so shall you rip."

Hardest: writing the scene in which Ludelphia remembers a story her mother told about Big Mama, an ancestor who came over on a slave ship. I wanted that scene in the book because I felt a strong need to establish the long-standing history of the strength of the people of Gee's Bend, how it has always been populated by survivors. But it was a tough scene to write, painful even just in imagination.